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ABSTRACT

This paper describes political pitfalls faced by principals in dealing with parents and central administration. It recommends that principals administer all student discipline fairly and consistently and place safety and fairness over parental grievances. Second, principals should challenge the status quo when it comes to improving student outcomes. For example, principals should question special-education practices that do not appear to be helping the student. It is a matter of principle to make decisions that are best for children, especially those students who may not fit the conventional mode. (LMI)

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A Matter of Principles:

Doing What You Know Is Right, Even When It is Difficult

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A Matter of Principles:

Doing What You Know Is Right, Even When It is Difficult

There is an old adage that says, "A man has just got to do what a man has to do." Sometimes with principals the same old adage is true. A principal just has to do what a principal has to do. It becomes a matter of principles.

There are three realms of leadership that principals exert (Cuban, 1988). The most obvious is instructional. The second is managerial. The third is the one that many people do not think about or realize how important it is. It is the political realm. Unfortunately, it connects with and overshadows everything else we do. Larry Cuban states, "Aiming to improve the character, knowledge, and skills of children makes schools intensely political places" (Cuban, 1988). Making political choices therefore creates the school as a potential mine-field for administrators.

The political realm of school leadership does not necessarily mean Republican or Democrat. It does not mean actively getting involved in local, state, or national politics. It does mean being careful of all the little hidden agendas that exist on every campus and in every district in the world. Sometimes the agendas are stronger than others. Sometimes they are disguised and better hidden. Sometimes they're barely kept secrets.

But they are always there.

Good old hidden agendas, just waiting to get you when you're not looking.

In order to survive, a principal has to walk a tight line between the mind field of potential political bombs and doing what

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is right for the student. Sometimes this is very difficult. Step on too many bombs, and you are gone. That's it. Goodbye. It's the district's way or the highway. But there also comes a time when even though a principal knows she is taking a big risk, she still has to do what she has to do. She has to do what is morally and ethically right. She has to do what she knows will let her sleep with herself at night. If she doesn't, the loser will be the child. It will also eat her up from the inside out. This is called doing what is right when you know it could create real havoc...with you in the middle of it.

Doing what is right even when you know it can create a mess can happen in different ways. Frequently it happens when a principal backs a teacher's tough, well thought out decision against a parent's wishes, knowing that decision will cause trouble. Even the best schools have their share of "known nuts," parents who think their children were born perfect, have never done anything wrong, and don't want anyone to dare insinuate that the child is less than the perfect angel they know him to be. These people are a real pain, because no matter how much time the principal spends with them, no matter how diplomatic, concerned, and caring he is, it still isn't going to do a bit of good. These parents are still going to be nuts.

The absolute worst thing the principal can do with these parents is to give in to them. Once they have been given in to, they will do it from then until eternity. Yes, it may seem much, much easier to just give in, to get them off your back and your teachers' backs, but then who is the real loser? The child! What

is he learning? Create enough of a scene at home over being supposedly mistreated at school and Mama will cause the biggest stink you ever did see. She will eventually wear down the teachers' and the principals' resistance and the child can have free reign to hit, push, cuss, steal, and do inappropriate things with bananas and certain body parts...

Take the example of Joshua, a very beautiful little boy who knows no discipline at home. Joshua has created all manner of evil the whole year at school and Mama Nuthead has had an excuse for his misbehavior every single time. She also has a penchant for calling the teachers and principal at home at all hours of the night, usually beginning around 10:00 P.M., to yell and scream a little bit. The last straw occurs during P.E. when Joshua decks Stephen, a seven year old autistic child, sending him to his knees on the gym floor because poor Stephen made the sad mistake of hugging him. Second graders and the teacher came running from every direction to help Stephen. Mama's excuse this time?

Stephen invaded Joshua's space.

By late in the year the easiest thing by far would be to give in to Joshua's hysterical mother who is upset that her child is being punished, because to <u>not</u> give into her will be a guarantee of at least a week of threatening phone calls at all hours of the day and night. But who would be the winner here? Not Joshua. He would just learn he can do absolutely anything to absolutely anyone...and get by with it. And certainly not Stephen who has learned his lesson about hugging the wrong person! Sadly, poor Stephen may think twice before hugging <u>anyone</u> again.

Sometimes a principal has just got to do what a principal has to do. Remember to make sure all discipline is administered consistently and fairly. Get the child's side of the story. Make sure the facts of the incident are correct. Make sure the child really did what he was supposed to have done. Then stick with your decision. It may be a major headache for you, but remember, you're not there for a restful day. You're there for the benefit of students. Safety and fairness must always remain top priorities regardless of hysterical "poor me" parents.

Another political pitfall is doing anything that might upset the Central Office. It is an unwritten rule among principals that is never taught in colleges of principal preparation to never, never, never do anything that might rock the boat. That could upset the status quo. Worst yet, it could lead to progressive change, and horror of horrors, what could be worse then that??? We might learn to do things in a more efficient manner or with a different strategy for improving student outcomes. But, if you have to change anything along the way.... Look out. The sure way to the top of the bureaucracy is to just "keep on keeping on," never propagating change.

Far too many principals weigh the possible benefits of change, then take a look at a reactive rather than a proactive central administration and conclude, "No, thank you. I'll just stick right here in my own little campus and not rock any boats. I don't want to see my name in the newspaper, and I sure don't want to do anything to cause my superintendent to take a good look at my school... or me! I'm just going to sit here, shuffle along, have

mediocre student success, and wait out my retirement. It's only 15 more years, you know!"

Joel Barker (Barker, 1993) and Tom Peters (Peters, 1988) both preach learning to love change and the restructuring of paradigms. If it weren't for someone looking for a better way, a better end product, Eli Whitney would never have invented the cotton gin, Jonas Salk never would have invented a vaccine for polio, and Chrysler Motors would not have pulled itself out of bankruptcy. Someday, because someone is looking for a better way, we are going to have a cure for cancer and AIDS. And someday, because someone is looking for a better way, we are going to have better strategies to deal with dyslexia and other mysteries called learning disabilities. Someday we will have Total Quality Management.

In our quest to not upset any bureaucratic sacred cows, an excellent example and one of the <u>most</u> scared is special education. Never, never, never we learn, should we <u>ever</u> make the mistake of questioning the special education department. <u>They</u> are the specialists. They have their diagnostic tests as well as their federal, state, and local guidelines. They even have their charts and measurements. Their diagnostic staff may not ever have spent 30 minutes with this child under nontesting conditions and know absolutely nothing about his personality, his learning style, or his temperament, but they know more about him and what is best for him then his parents, his teachers, and the collective school staff. So at ARD time, it is sometimes far easier, and a lot more tempting, to just say, "Yes, your tests are absolutely right. There is no margin of error. Your standard deviation cannot

fluctuate. You are the source of all wisdom when it comes to Caleb," then it is to say, "Hey, wait a minute here. We are looking at a child. His parents, his teachers, and his physician feel we need to give strong consideration to looking at another alternative. How about it? Can we take a minute to check out doing something different for Caleb?? What we have been doing is obviously not working!" In our quest for standardized test results we have forgotten who we are dealing with: human beings. To cross special education, or any other sacred cow, can make the wrong people mad. To cross special education can lead to reprimands and commands to, "Support special education, regardless!!!" To cross any sacred cow can lead you to a lot of grief and even political destruction.

So, why do it?

It's a matter of principles.

Sometimes a principal just has to do what a principal has to do. Sometimes a student will not fit his nice little round self into our nice little square holes. When that happens we can go with the flow, accept the status quo, let the child lose precious time and experiences, or we can take a deep breath and consider it as a matter of principle. We can do the ethical thing, even if it is difficult. We can seek expert advice from those that are closest to a child, we can spend time with the child ourselves, we can research precedents, and we can spend a great deal of time thinking, studying, pondering and praying about the right thing to do. When we finally find the inner peace that we may not have the <u>perfect</u> solution, but it is the most <u>workable</u> solution for this

child at this time, then we should stick with that decision, regardless of the flack we are afraid we may catch from above.

We're taking the heat for the child. The ultimate winner is the child. Without us the child is vulnerable and susceptible to whatever flows down. With us the child has a chance. It's that simple. It's all about the child.

None of this is to say that principals should go around looking for opportunities to create discord with parents or bureaucracy. That is absurd. Most educators have an inborn appreciation for peace and harmony. We live for it and strive for it every day. We hope for it when we awaken and pray for it as we slumber. The lack of it gives us ulcers, our most common occupational hazard. So how do peace and harmony find congruence in difficult situations that require tough decisions? Through time, reflection, and soul searching, by doing the right thing even when it is difficult. It's easy to sit back and take the easy way out (i.e. Joshua). It's not so easy to bite the bullet and be the suffering servant for a child when you feel you're the one that is going to catch it when it comes back around (i.e. Caleb). But, it's what we must do.

It's really just a matter of principles.

Sometimes a principal has just got to do what a principal just has to do...for the children.

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